

Proponents of a bailout for the Big Three say all Americans have a stake in the survival of the U.S. auto industry. But few people have as much of a stake as Florida Rep. Vern Buchanan. One of the richest members of Congress, the freshman Republican once owned nearly 20 car dealerships. He c...

Proponents of a bailout for the Big Three say all Americans have a stake in the survival of the U.S. auto industry.

But few people have as much of a stake as Florida Rep. Vern Buchanan.

One of the richest members of Congress, the freshman Republican once owned nearly 20 car dealerships. He currently has five — including a Ford dealership in his district.

At a town hall meeting last week with voters back home, Buchanan cited the financial hardships at his own car businesses when explaining that he doesn't believe the country can afford to let the auto manufacturers go under.

"I don't think we can afford to just let them collapse," the Sarasota Herald-Tribune quoted Buchanan. "Because all of them are in a bad situation. I know it firsthand."

Buchanan spokeswoman Sally Tibbetts said the congressman was unavailable for an interview. Asked if she was available to answer questions, Tibbetts forwarded statements from what appeared to be a press release.

In those statements, Buchanan said he has "serious concerns" about another bailout and questions whether it will be enough to keep the automakers from needing to come back for more.

"I have to weigh their request against what's in the best interests of the American taxpayer," Buchanan said.

Tibbetts did not respond to a question about whether the congressman saw a potential conflict of interest in voting on the auto industry bailout.

“This is one of those questions that members of Congress have to ask themselves,” said Massie Ritsch, communications director for the Center for Responsive Politics, noting that Buchanan’s vote is one of 435. “It can at least create the appearance of a conflict.”

Buchanan isn’t the only member of Congress with ties to the auto industry. Before Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) won election in 2001, he owned a Chrysler dealership in his home state. **Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.)**

was also in the car business for a while, and he reportedly plans to vote “present” on any bailout for the auto industry because he still owns land where his former dealership was located.

Based on financial disclosure forms, Roll Call has estimated Buchanan’s net worth at about \$65 million.

He has made much of his money over the past 15 years as the namesake of Buchanan Automotive Group.

In 2006, Buchanan campaigned for Florida’s 13th Congressional District as a businessman. But after winning election in one of the closest and most contested races of the cycle, he started selling off many of his car dealerships.

He easily won reelection last month, despite the fact that some former employees at his car dealerships had filed lawsuits accusing his businesses of fraudulent practices, including schemes to rip off Ford.

Buchanan denied the allegations.

Although it remains unclear whether Buchanan will back a bailout for the Big Three, he has

suggested that Congress adopt some policies to help car manufacturers that would benefit his own businesses.

He has called on Congress to offer consumers tax incentives to buy more-fuel-efficient cars. He has also said that, rather than cutting checks directly to taxpayers as part of an economic stimulus package, as Treasury did earlier this year, the federal government should give Americans tax credits of up to \$3,000 to purchase a \$30,000 car, according to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.

This, Buchanan has said, would give Detroit more cars to build — and would help dealers sell them.